

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – May 2 - 6, 2011  
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Signs have parts. This was the fundamental contribution that Bill Stokoe famously made with regard to ASL. If signs had parts and those parts could be manipulated to form new sign concepts then sign language was like other languages. The “sign words” were made up of sub-parts. In spoken language those sub-parts are called phonemes. Stokoe called the parts of signs cheremes (cher being the Greek word for “hand”). The parts of signs are handshape, location, palm orientation and movement.

Signs have parts but do the parts contribute to the meaning of a sign? Let’s see.

Let’s analyze the movement part of signs.

Think about the movement of the following signs:

HAPPY SAD THRILLED DEPRESSED

Does the upward and downward movements of these signs communicate part of the meaning? The upward movement corresponds to the idea of “positive”. The downward movement corresponds the idea of “negative”. These ideas relate to the meaning behind these signs. The sign HAPPY produced with a downward movement wouldn’t make sense. Upward is a metaphor in our understanding of the world that corresponds with positive things. Downward corresponds with negative things. Think about the movement in signs like FUTURE, PAST, MAKE-PROGRESS, PROMOTE, DEMOTE. See that the movement corresponds to these concepts.

Other parts of signs contribute to meaning as well. Think about location. Signs for feelings are performed in the chest/heart area. Signs for thinking and knowing are performed at the forehead. Think about a sign like ASSISTANT. Isn’t the location of the hand under the other hand significant? Can you think of other sign locations that represent part of the metaphorical meaning?

The handshape parameter (chereme) of signs also often contribute to or correspond to the meaning expressed in signs. If I make a joke by signing UNDERSTAND with my pinky finger instead of my index finger and I use this modification of the handshape at the right time and in the right context people who understand sign language will laugh. This “play on the sign” is funny because there is meaning associated with the “pinky finger” handshape. It is typically used to represent thin, tiny, small, little things. We see this handshape in signs like SKINNY, SPAGHETTI, VERY-LITTLE/INSIGNIFICANT and so forth. People will laugh at this “play on signs” because they intuitively understand the meaning carried in the pinky handshape. Flat-handshapes communicate an element of meaning in signs like BOOK, WALL, FLOOR, WINDOW etc. Can you think of other signs where the handshape “makes sense”?

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